



Health and Stress Among College Students

Senior Project

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By

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Abstract

Mental and physical health are openly talked about more than before, but it is still not talked about enough. Many individuals hear 'health' and think about nutrition and physical fitness, but in reality, it also pertains to the mind and spirit. College students are at high risk for poor and mental health for a variety of reasons. Due to college students being independent for their first time and a heavy work load, they are often overwhelmed. Most time they do not know how to cope and resolve situations they may encounter. The years of college aged are very important to an individual's life, these are the years where their brain fully develops, habits are set in stone, and lifestyle changes are made. The college years represent a period of transition from youth to adulthood, where students begin to adopt life-long behaviors. Since poor mental and physical health can be the cause of various things, it can also affect students in various ways. As students begin their college years, it is important that they can recognize the signs of poor behavior and have the correct information to resolve it.

Health and Stress Among College Students

Although in today's society health and stress are openly talked about more than before, it still is not talked about enough. Although many individuals are taught healthier eating habits and the importance of mental and physical health, many of them are not aware of the symptoms and treatments. Many individuals often hear 'health' and think about nutrition and physical fitness, but in reality, it also pertains to the mind and spirit.

Health and stress can be seen in individuals of all ages, races, and sexes, but it is more prevalent in college students. Have you ever met a college student who was not stressed or had some sort of health issue? The years of college are very important to an individual's future life, these are the years where their brain fully develops, habits are set in stone, and lifestyle changes are made. Health among college students in particular is important because the college years represent a period of transition from adolescence to adulthood, where students begin to adopt life-long behaviors (Sax, J. Linda, 2010, p. 252).

The World Health Organization defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. (World Health Organization). "For many individuals the college years are a time of high-risk when they experience the onset of mental or physical health problems." (Downs, A., & Ashton, J., 2011). Health pertains to both an individual's mental well-being and their physical well-being. Several high-priority health issues have been reported for college students, including substance abuse, mental health, physical health, and sexual health. Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It can affect how individuals feel, think, and act. (What is Mental Health?) Physical health

includes the condition of your body, everything from disease to fitness levels. Mental health and physical health should not be thought of as separate as they can often be interdependent of one another.

In order to understand these aspects of college students, we also need to face the fact that men and women have different concerns. Men are more concerned about physical fitness and alcoholism, whereas women are more concerned about body image, weight control, and sexual violence (Sax, J. Linda, 2010, p. 252-253). At first glance everybody notices an individual's appearance. This automatically allows people to see a first-hand glimpse at an individual's physical health on the outside. Although physical health does not only pertain to an individual's looks, it is often the first thing somebody notices about you.

Physical health also pertains to the inside of your body, such as disease and can cause many problems that may be the result of an assortment of things. According to the growing number of news outlets describing college students' binge drinking, unsafe sex, depression, and suicide, it is not surprising that college students' health is a matter of concern for researchers and college health professionals (Sax, J. Linda, 2010, p. 252). It has been noticed that college students are often at high-risk for bad physical health. It is shown that students engage in relatively high rates of risky health behaviors, such as practicing unsafe sex and making poor dietary choices (Downs, A., & Ashton, J., 2011, p. 229). Research has also shown that college students move from normal weight to overweight as they progress through their college years (p. 229).

Everything an individual does, will have an effect in some way or form. Since college students are often partaking in high-risk behaviors, many of them will face repercussions in the future that they might not think about. Alcohol and drug abuse can lead to academic problems,

violent behavior, physical injuries, and possibly even death. Depression and stress are often related back to physical illnesses, loneliness and suicide. Unsafe sex can also lead to them being at risk for a variety of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV.

College students are often less strict about their diet, which can be harmful later in life. Research has shown that the most important factors predicting food selection among adults are: taste, nutrition, convenience, pleasure, and weight control, in that order (Deshpande Sameer, Basil D. Michael, Basil Z. Debra, 2009, p. 146). Food choice is especially important when people step out independently, such as going away to college. Several studies have shown that college students often have poor eating habits, are eating fewer fruits and vegetables all while eating high-fat, high-calorie foods (p. 146). Not only can worsen dietary habits among students lead to dietary problems like high-cholesterol, diabetes, and heart disease, it can also lead to weight problems.

Likewise, college students also take high-risk chances with their physical health relating to appearance and fitness levels. It is well-known that physical activity plays a significant role in improving an individual's quality of life. Over half of college students report a decrease in physical activity after high school graduation even though they generally have access to resources, are well informed about physical activity, and have a supportive social network (Bhochhibhoya, Amir, Branscum, Paul, Taylor, E. Laurette, Hofford, Craig, 2014, p. 17). The decrease in physical activity can often be due to their new independent adult life and demanding work-study schedule (p. 17). If not changed, low physical activity levels can lead to numerous long-term health problems such as obesity.

Many of the problems that students experience also results from low self-esteem, a heavy work load, and stress. The symptoms of poor physical health vary a lot depending on which

aspect of poor physical health one might be referring to. Symptoms can include but are not limited to pain, shortness of breath, tiredness, anger, unusual discharge and trouble sleeping. If a college student is experiencing any unusual symptoms that persist for a lengthy amount of time, they should go to their local health clinic or doctor.

Just like symptoms, solutions and treatments vary according to the problem. Most physical health troubles can be resolved with some help. Tips and treatments can include participating in physical fitness, antibiotics, dietary changes, lowering stress levels, and speaking to a trusted adult or professional. Treatment and solutions not only vary according to the problem, but also vary depending on the person. Just because one treatment worked for one individual does not mean it will work for everybody. It might take some time to discover what works best for the individual, but the process will be worth it once they start to see a change.

Mental health on the other hand is often overlooked because you usually cannot see the affects so easily. However, mental health and physical health go hand-in-hand, one often leading to the other. Bhochhibhoya et. al. explains that individuals with major depression had a 4.5 times higher risk of a cardiovascular disease compared with those with no history of depression (p. 18). Downs and Ashton state that research suggest that college students are at high risk for developing mental health problems. A study conducted in 2008 found that over 53% of undergraduate students sampled reported moderate to severe depressive symptoms, and 11% had considered suicide in the past four weeks (p. 229). Ashton expresses how college students also appear to be at elevated risk for anxiety disorders, with one study identifying 52.8% as experiencing moderate to high levels of anxiety (p. 229).

Gender is not the only factor in mental health problems, things such as ethnicity and the type of college a student is attending can also affect ones' mental health. Sax states how women

were less confident about their emotional well-being than men, and freshman who attended private universities were more confident than students who attended public 2-year colleges (p. 258). Researchers often notice college students with more physical health problems and mental health problems, they believe it is due to them being independent, making their own choices, and having a heavy work load. More importantly, researchers have discovered that most chronic mental disorders have an age of onset just prior to or during the typical college years (Downs, A., & Ashton, J., 2011).

In recent years, the field of positive psychology has emerged to bring awareness to the role of psychology in making life more fulfilling, enhancing human functioning, and decreasing stress (Hasel, Mohamadi Kurosh, Abdolhoseini, Amir, Ganji, Puyesh, 2011, p. 1354). According to the Cleveland Clinic, “stress is the body’s reaction to any change that requires an adjustment or response.” It is a normal reaction that can respond to changes physically, mentally, or emotionally. Although stress is usually perceived to coincide with negative life changes, it can also coincide with positive life changes.

College students undoubtedly experience a variety of stressors including financial burdens, academic issues, and social strains. Pierceall and Kiem state how stress among college students may also result from overextended workloads, problems with time management, challenges with interpersonal relationships, or fear of academic failure (p. 704). They showed statistics that proved women perceived more stress than men, and that the number of semester hours enrolled in and type of program students were enrolled in did not show a significant relationship towards stress (p. 708). These statistics show that college students have many reasons to be stressed and they all might not be stressed over the same aspects of life.

Stress can sometimes lead to mental and physical health complications. Although stress is a natural result, there are things individuals can do to help lower their stress levels and things that can help them avoid some of the stress they currently experience. In order to help ease your stress levels, you must first recognize the warning signs of it.

There are different levels of stress, acute and chronic. Acute refers to conditions that are of short duration while chronic refers to conditions that lasts three months or more. Acute stress would mostly pertain to short term challenges such as a paper that may be due in a week, a friend who is upset with you, or getting a bad grade on a test. Chronic stress would pertain more to being stressed the entire school year, a bad athletic injury, or financial burdens. Both types of stress can wear down the body's natural defenses, however chronic stress is longer therefore acts more on the body's natural defenses. Symptoms of chronic stress can include, but are not limited to, dizziness, aches and pains, problems sleeping, weight gain or loss, muscle tension, and tiredness or exhaustion.

Since stress is a common thing and unavoidable, people have to learn how to reduce and relieve their stress levels. There a variety of tips an individual can use to help relieve their stress, they just have to find which one works the best for them. These tips can vary from keeping a positive attitude, be assertive of your feelings and opinions, exercise regularly, seek support, and avoid alcohol, drugs, or compulsive behaviors (Stress: Signs, Symptoms, Management & Prevention). "The most common way of coping with stress was talking to family and friends (77%)" (Pierceall, Emily, & Keim, Marybelle, 2007, p. 709). Pierceall and Keim also showed that this was followed by leisure activities and exercises, drinking alcohol, smoking, and using illegal drugs, doing nothing, and lastly talking to a professional (p. 709).

Staying healthy is an important aspect of succeeding in college. Physical and mental health are associated with academic development, leadership qualities, and overall satisfaction with college. As learned above, physical health and mental health cover a variety of topics. Poor physical and mental health can be seen in any ethnicity, gender, and situation; however, it is more prevalent in college students. College students are at high-risk behaviors across the board and are more susceptible to poor mental and physical health because of their newly found independence and their heavy work load. It is important that people know of the warning signs and symptoms of negative behavior so that they can step in and help resolve the situation before it worsens.

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